



Sonargaon University (SU)

**Research Monograph
On
A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade
Garment Industries of Bangladesh**

Research Monograph Submitted for the partial fulfilment of the award of the degree
in

**LL.B. (Honours)
Department of Law
Sonargaon University (SU)**

Submitted by :

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Submitted To:

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Date of Submission: 5th July 2025

Dedicated
To

My Beloved Parents



UGC & Govt. Approved
Sonargaon University (SU)
সোনারগাঁও ইউনিভার্সিটি (এসইউ)

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Letter of Transmittal

To
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Lecturer,

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Subject: Submission of Research Monograph on “A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh”

Sir,

This is a great pleasure to submit the Research Monograph on “A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh” as a partial requirement for the fulfillment of my LL.B. (Honours) course under the Department of Law of the Sonargaon University (SU).

I have given due efforts to make this Research Monograph as fruitful one and to make it as informative as possible. I hope that this paper will not be the formality of academic course completion rather it will be a source of information for other purpose on this topic.

Sincerely yours,

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Declaration

I do hereby declare that the Research Monograph Title “A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh” prepared solely by me and which has been submitted to the department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU) for achieving the LL.B. (Honours) Degree. This is an original work of mine. No part of this research, in any way or in form, has been submitted to any University or Institution for any Degree, Diploma or for other similar purposes.

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Certification by the Supervisor

This is to certify that the work presented in this dissertation is based on the work, carried out by the author herself under my supervision in Department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU).

It is also certifying that the work presented here is original and suitable for submission as the style and contents, for fulfillment of LL.B. (Honours) program.

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Acknowledgement

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful". Praise by Allah & thanks to Allah for patronizing me to finish this Research Monograph. I am very happy to finish it. It is a great Research of my life. It is a long cherished hope of my life to become a great lawyer. That's why I have admitted in the Department of Law in Sonargaon University (SU) to fulfill my dream. But through my whole study life in this field, I did not get much more opportunities to examine and show my knowledge and skill in this wide field. Lastly I have got a great chance to make my study meaningful when I got the chance to prepare a Research Monograph on " A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh"

I acknowledge my grateful to respected course teacher Naimul Razzaque for instructing me how to prepare a Research Monograph and his famous Books lectures on this subject help me to complete my task sincerely.

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Thank you

Jobayda

Abstract

The readymade garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh is a cornerstone of economic growth, accounting for over 80% of export revenue and employing over four million workers, with women mostly from rural, disadvantaged backgrounds comprising 60–70% of the workforce. Their participation has reshaped economic and gender dynamics, challenging traditional patriarchal norms and expanding women's roles beyond domestic confines. However, their socio-economic empowerment is undermined by persistent labour rights violations, hazardous working conditions, and limited access to justice.

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the labour rights of female RMG workers through a legal and socio-political framework. It evaluates national and international legal instruments, including the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (amended), associated regulations, and global conventions like ILO C100 (Equal Remuneration), C111 (Discrimination in Employment), and CEDAW. Using a qualitative doctrinal approach, the study integrates case studies, policy documents, NGO reports, academic sources, and expert interviews to highlight the gap between legal protections and their practical enforcement.

Findings reveal significant disparities between legal provisions and workplace realities. Despite laws guaranteeing equal pay, maternity benefits, harassment protection, and safe workplaces, female workers face wage disparities, informal employment practices, lack of union representation, and gender discrimination. Common issues include delayed or irregular wages, denial of benefits, unpaid overtime, and lack of formal contracts, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation and arbitrary dismissal.

Workplace safety remains a critical concern, even after high-profile incidents like the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse. While initiatives like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have driven some progress, many smaller factories evade compliance. Problems such as poor ventilation, inadequate lighting, overcrowding, excessive hours, and unsafe fire exits persist. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment are widespread yet underreported due to the lack of female inspectors, effective grievance systems, and fear of retaliation.

The study also highlights women's exclusion from trade unions and collective bargaining, despite their majority in the workforce. Cultural, institutional, and organizational barriers, coupled with male-dominated union structures and threats of job loss, limit women's participation and advocacy. Informal workers, including those in subcontracting units and home-based production, face even greater challenges, operating outside legal protections with low wages, long hours, and no social security.

Institutional shortcomings exacerbate these issues, with the Department of Labour hampered by underfunding, insufficient staffing, and limited capacity. Factory inspections are often irregular, superficial, or compromised by corruption. Legal recourse is slow, costly, and inaccessible, discouraging women from seeking justice. The lack of sex-disaggregated labour data further hinders evidence-based policy development.

The study proposes comprehensive policy reforms, including amending the Bangladesh Labour Act to include gender-specific provisions like mandatory childcare, menstrual leave, and robust anti-harassment measures. Strengthening labour inspections through increased funding, training, and hiring female inspectors is critical. Accessible, independent grievance mechanisms and anonymous reporting systems are needed to protect female workers. Formalizing informal labour arrangements and extending legal protections to marginalized workers are also essential. Promoting female leadership in trade unions through training and affirmative action is recommended to enhance representation.

Ultimately, the study calls for a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach involving the government, factory owners, unions, civil society, international buyers, and labour organizations. Without collective action to improve conditions, enforce laws, and address structural inequalities, the vision of equitable, safe, and dignified work for women in Bangladesh's RMG sector will remain elusive, and the industry's global competitiveness will continue to rely on the exploitation of its most vulnerable workers.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector has developed into the most critical foundation of the nation's export economy and industrial employment since the early 1980s. Recent data indicates the RMG industry accounts for roughly 84% of the country's total export revenue and provides jobs for more than 4.5 million workers, over 60% of whom are women.¹ This sector has profoundly reshaped Bangladesh's socio-economic landscape, significantly empowering women from rural and urban low-income backgrounds by offering formal employment.² Many of these women are entering paid work for the first time, challenging conventional gender roles and boosting household income, children's education, and poverty reduction efforts.³

However, this impressive expansion and gendered inclusion in the workforce are accompanied by severe human rights issues. Female RMG employees consistently encounter labour rights violations, such as discriminatory wages, harassment, hazardous working environments, lack of maternity benefits, restrictions on union formation, and unjust dismissals.⁴ Despite existing national labour legislation and international commitments, enforcement is weak, particularly in factories operating within sub-contracting networks. Women workers, often possessing limited formal education and awareness of their legal rights, struggle to confront exploitative practices. The absence of gender-responsive policies and institutional support further heightens their vulnerability.

Furthermore, major industrial catastrophes like the Tazreen Fashions fire (2012) and the Rana Plaza building collapse (2013) laid bare the structural negligence and deficiency in corporate accountability within the industry. These events caused tragic fatalities – predominantly women and underscored the critical need for reforming the labour regime, especially from a gender justice standpoint.

Within this context, this research undertakes a critical, multidimensional analysis of labour rights for women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector. It investigates the legal, institutional, and social frameworks regulating their employment, identifies the systemic obstacles they encounter, and proposes concrete recommendations for legislative and policy reforms to secure justice, dignity, and gender equity in the workplace.

¹ Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), *Annual Report 2023*, Dhaka: BGMEA, 2023.

² World Bank, *Empowering Women in the Garment Sector*, 2022.

³ Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (Verso 2000).

⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most*, 2015.

1.2 Rationale and Importance of the Study

This study is founded on the understanding that gender and labour rights intersect in complex and frequently unjust ways within Bangladesh's RMG sector. While numerous studies have examined the economic dimensions of the garment industry, a significant gap exists in gender-specific legal and rights-based analyses. Much research tends to neglect the nuanced experiences of women workers who occupy the lowest tiers of industrial labour hierarchies yet are vital to the industry's competitiveness.⁵

The significance of this research stems from the following considerations:

- **Highlighting Gendered Labour Inequities:** The study illuminates the structural and systemic discrimination confronting women workers, including job segregation, gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, and inadequate representation in factory leadership and trade unions.⁶
- **Legal Evaluation:** It assesses the effectiveness of domestic legal frameworks such as the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and associated regulations, alongside Bangladesh's commitments under international conventions like CEDAW and ILO Conventions 100, 111, 183.
- **Policy Relevance:** By providing a gender-sensitive critique of current frameworks, the study informs policymakers, human rights advocates, labour activists, and international buyers involved in shaping ethical supply chains.⁷
- **Timeliness and Urgency:** In the post-Rana Plaza era, global and national stakeholders have shown heightened concern for corporate social responsibility (CSR) and compliance. Nevertheless, many reforms have been superficial, and the lived realities of women workers remain insufficiently researched and acknowledged.

Consequently, this research seeks to address a crucial academic and policy void by offering an in-depth, gender-justice-focused examination of labour conditions in the RMG sector, with implications for wider labour market reforms and women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

⁵ Rahman, M., and Bhattacharya, D., *Bangladesh's Apparel Sector in Post-Rana Plaza Era*, CPD Occasional Paper Series, 2020.

⁶ ActionAid Bangladesh, *Women in the Garment Industry: Realities, Challenges, and Prospects*, 2019.

⁷ Ethical Trading Initiative, *Gender Equity in Global Supply Chains: A Business Guide*, 2021.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a critical, gender-focused legal analysis of labour rights within Bangladesh's RMG sector.

The specific objectives are:

1. To scrutinize national legal frameworks, including constitutional guarantees, labour laws, and gender-specific provisions, concerning the rights of women workers.
2. To trace the historical and socio-political development of women's involvement in Bangladesh's industrial economy, with a particular focus on the garment sector.
3. To identify the nature and root causes of the principal challenges legal, social, and economic faced by female RMG workers, encompassing issues related to health, safety, wages, and dignity.
4. To evaluate the actual implementation and enforcement of legal standards within factory environments.
5. To propose evidence-based policy and legal recommendations that safeguard and advance women's labour rights, particularly within global supply chain dynamics.

1.4 Research Questions

Guided by the above objectives, this study addresses the following key research questions:

1. What are the main legal, constitutional, and institutional mechanisms governing labour rights in Bangladesh, and how effectively do they address gender-specific issues?
2. How has the evolution of women's participation in industrial labour, specifically within the RMG sector, unfolded over time?
3. What are the prevalent labour rights violations experienced by female garment workers, and which socio-legal factors contribute to their ongoing vulnerability?
4. To what extent do existing national laws and international obligations align with the enforcement, redress, and representation realities experienced by women workers?
5. What specific reforms legal, institutional, and policy-related are necessary to establish a gender-just and safe working environment in the garment sector?

1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope: This study concentrates exclusively on Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry, analyzing the labour rights of women workers from legal, institutional, and socio-economic perspectives.

- **Geographic Scope:** While the RMG industry is dispersed across Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Chattogram, the study is not confined to any specific district but references generalized trends and case studies.
- **Thematic Scope:** The research encompasses labour legislation, gender-based workplace rights, compliance with international standards, working conditions, and legal redress/reform mechanisms.
- **Temporal Scope:** Although the study addresses historical background, it primarily focuses on the contemporary situation of the last two decades, especially post-2000 reforms.

Limitations:

- The study relies predominantly on secondary sources (published reports, judicial decisions, legal documents, media analyses) due to time and resource constraints.
- Logistical limitations prevented extensive field surveys and ethnographic studies; however, existing case studies and testimonies from prior research were reviewed.
- The findings may be impacted by the evolving nature of labour laws, factory regulations, and trade agreements, which could change during or after the study's completion.

1.6 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and analytical methodology, integrating doctrinal, socio-legal, and comparative approaches to construct a comprehensive understanding of labour rights for women in the RMG sector.

a. Doctrinal Legal Research:

- Detailed review of constitutional guarantees (Articles 14, 15, 19, 20, 28, etc.).
- Analysis of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, Labour Rules 2015, EPZ Labour laws, and relevant amendments.
- Examination of international legal instruments such as ILO Conventions, CEDAW, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

b. Socio-Legal and Literature Review:

- Review of feminist legal theory, labour movement history, and the political economy of the RMG sector.
- Analysis of gendered division of labour, cultural stereotypes, and social norms affecting women's bargaining power.
- Review of reports from NGOs (e.g., BLAST, BRAC, Ain o Salish Kendra), trade unions, and watchdog bodies.

c. Case Studies:

- In-depth analysis of incidents like Rana Plaza (2013) and Tazreen Fashions fire (2012).
- Secondary data review of documented interviews, media investigations, and factory-level assessments.

d. Comparative Analysis:

- Assessment of labour laws and enforcement practices in India, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka to identify relative strengths and weaknesses.
- Exploration of international best practices in upholding women's workplace rights.

1.7 Organization of the Study

The study is organized into six chapters, each building upon the previous to present a thorough analysis:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction** – Establishes the study's background, rationale, objectives, scope, and methodology.
- **Chapter 2: Legal and Institutional Framework** – Provides an overview of Bangladesh's labour rights regime, focusing on national and international legal provisions, enforcement bodies, and institutional mechanisms.
- **Chapter 3: Women's Participation in the RMG Sector** – Examines the historical growth of the garment industry and the changing role of women within it, addressing economic and social transformations.
- **Chapter 4: Challenges Faced by Female Workers** – Analyzes key issues such as wage disparity, unsafe conditions, harassment, denial of maternity rights, and limited access to justice.
- **Chapter 5: Case Studies and Comparative Analysis** – Discusses landmark events and compares Bangladesh's legal standards with other South Asian countries to derive policy lessons.
- **Chapter 6: Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion** – Summarizes key findings, identifies legal and policy gaps, and provides actionable recommendations for reforming the industry from a gender-rights perspective.

Chapter 2

Legal and Institutional Framework of Labour Rights in Bangladesh

2.1 Historical Literature Review

2.1.1 Evolution of Labour Rights in Bengal during British Rule

The foundation of labour legislation in Bengal emerged under British colonial administration, driven primarily by economic imperatives rather than humanitarian concerns. Early regulations like the Factories Act of 1881, focused on the textile industry, aimed to restrict child labour and working hours. Subsequent Acts in 1891 and 1934 offered limited extensions to these protections. Scholars contend these measures reflected a colonial governance approach characterized by paternalism and racial bias, prioritizing industrial output over worker welfare. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar suggests such laws functioned more to control labour than empower it.⁸ Female labour was marginalized, with colonial policies overlooking their specific needs and reinforcing patriarchal norms about domestic roles. As Sumit Sarkar observes, the expansion of industrial capitalism did not foster corresponding increases in legal awareness or collective bargaining rights among women workers, establishing a legacy of invisibility that endures.⁹

2.1.2 Labour Movements and Gender Role in East Pakistan Period

The East Pakistan era (1950s–1970s) saw accelerated industrialization through state-owned enterprises and heavy industries. The East Pakistan Labour Ordinance of 1965 codified rights concerning wages, employment conditions, and trade unions, yet these provisions were largely ineffective due to weak enforcement and political suppression. While historical accounts often center male actors, archival and oral evidence indicates significant female participation in mobilizations, food riots, and strikes within informal and light manufacturing sectors, particularly jute and textiles. Despite their activism, women were seldom in trade union leadership roles. Feminist scholars like Naila Kabeer argue this era's gendered dynamics of labour activism require deeper scholarly investigation, as legal narratives have frequently neglected women's contributions.¹⁰

⁸ Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁹ Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India: 1885–1947*. Macmillan, 1983.

¹⁰ Kabeer, Naila. "The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka." Verso, 2000.

2.1.3 Post-Independence Labour Law Developments

Following independence, Bangladesh's 1972 Constitution established principles for economic and social justice. Key articles include: Article 14 (emancipation of peasants/workers), Article 20 (dignity of labour), Article 34 (prohibition of forced labour), and Article 15 (right to work, fair wages, decent living). However, the legal framework remained fragmented until the landmark Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (BLA 2006), which consolidated numerous prior laws. Despite this progress, the BLA 2006's application proved uneven. While gender-neutral in language, it failed to adequately address workplace realities specific to women, such as sexual harassment, violence, and reproductive health concerns, which were either poorly covered or omitted entirely.¹¹

2.1.4 Rise of the RMG Sector in the 1980s

The 1980s, influenced by neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), marked a shift towards export-led growth, epitomized by the rapid expansion of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector. This coincided with a major demographic shift: a massive influx of rural women into the industrial workforce, often recruited for perceived docility and manual dexterity. While offering economic opportunities for women, this transition also entrenched exploitation, featuring subsistence-level wages, minimal safety standards, and poor enforcement of legal protections. Feminist economists like Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud describe this as "ambiguous empowerment" simultaneously enabling and constraining female labourers.¹²

2.1.5 Entry of Female Workers and Shifting Gender Dynamics

The large-scale entry of women into the workforce challenged traditional gender norms but did not achieve parity. Women became the majority on factory floors, yet men overwhelmingly retained decision-making authority in management, supervision, and union leadership. Scholarly research indicates that women's visibility in production has not translated into visibility within policy frameworks. Gender-specific needs – such as menstrual leave, childcare, or secure transport remain peripheral in labour legislation. Intersectional feminist analysis highlights that female workers typically confront a dual burden, navigating patriarchal structures both at home and in the workplace.¹³

¹¹ Rahman, Mustafizur. "Bangladesh Labour Act: A Commentary." BLAST Publications, 2015.

¹² Kabeer, Naila, and Mahmud, Simeen. "Imagining the Future: Gender and Social Protection in Bangladesh." *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2007.

¹³ Siddiqi, Dina M. "Do Bangladeshi Factory Workers Need Saving? Sisterhood in the Post-Sweatshop Era." *Feminist Review*, 2009.

2.1.6 Scholarly Studies on Labour Movements and Feminism in Bangladesh

Interdisciplinary research increasingly examines labour rights through a feminist lens. Scholars like S. Feldman, Khair Jahan Sogra, Rokeya Kabir, and Farida Akhter explore how macroeconomic policies, patriarchal legal systems, and class inequality converge to marginalize women in the RMG sector. Their work suggests the global apparel industry operates via a "global care chain," structurally embedding surplus value extracted from female workers in the Global South within global capitalism.¹⁴ Ethnographic studies further reveal that informal women's collectives and peer-support networks often serve as vital spaces for solidarity and resistance, functioning outside traditional union structures. This underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of labour struggles, particularly concerning gender, in Bangladesh.¹⁵

2.2 Definition and Scope of Labour Rights

Labour rights, recognized internationally as human rights, safeguard worker dignity, security, and freedom. Core ILO principles include rights to fair wages, safe working conditions, reasonable hours, and collective bargaining. Within Bangladesh's RMG sector, these rights are critically relevant:

- Minimum wage & timely payment: Essential for economic survival in urban slums.
- Safe & healthy workplaces: Especially urgent post-Rana Plaza.
- Maternity benefits & workplace childcare: Frequently absent in smaller factories.
- Freedom from sexual harassment & gender-based violence: Vastly underreported and rarely addressed.
- Right to organize & unionize: Routinely suppressed through anti-union tactics.

For female workers, a gender-sensitive conceptualization of labour rights is essential, acknowledging unpaid reproductive labour, bodily autonomy, and protection from both direct and structural violence.¹⁶

¹⁴ Feldman, S. *Crisis, Charity and the Rhetoric of Compassion: The Case of the Bangladesh Garment Industry*. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 2003.

¹⁵ Kabir, Rokeya. "Women Workers in Bangladesh: The Unseen Backbone." Naripokkho, 2010.

¹⁶ International Labour Organization. "Labour Standards and Gender Equality." ILO Reports, 2018.

2.3 Overview of Labour Laws in Bangladesh (Especially the Labour Act 2006)

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (BLA), amended in 2013 and 2018, is the primary labour law, structured into 21 chapters covering employment relations. Key provisions include:

- Chapter IX: Regulates working hours, leave, and overtime.
- Chapter X: Governs wage payment practices.
- Chapter XII: Provides 16 weeks paid maternity leave for eligible women.
- Chapter XIII: Addresses health, hygiene, ventilation, sanitation, and medical care.
- Chapters XIV–XVI: Govern trade union registration, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution.

Despite progressive clauses, enforcement is weak, particularly in subcontracting and informal settings. Maternity benefits, for instance, exclude temporary or probationary workers. Legal definitions of harassment remain narrow, and grievance mechanisms are often inaccessible.

2.4 Gender Equality Provisions in Law

The Bangladesh Constitution establishes foundational equality principles:

- Article 27: Equality before the law.
- Article 28: Prohibition of sex-based discrimination.
- Article 29: Equality of opportunity in public employment.

The National Women Development Policy (2011) outlines goals for women's economic participation, safety, and legal protection. However, these aspirations rarely translate into concrete labour policies. Labour inspectors lack gender sensitivity training, and factory audits typically prioritize productivity over compliance with women's rights. Legal scholars argue that ostensibly gender-neutral laws often mask structural inequalities, necessitating affirmative action and gender-specific provisions to address women's lived experiences.

2.5 International Conventions Ratified by Bangladesh

Bangladesh has ratified key international labour conventions:

- ILO C29 & C105: Forced Labour.
- ILO C100 & C111: Equal Remuneration and Non-Discrimination.
- ILO C138 & C182: Minimum Age and Worst Forms of Child Labour.
- ILO C87 & C98: Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining.
- CEDAW (1979): Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Despite these commitments, ILO reviews consistently identify significant failures in implementation within the RMG sector, including opaque union registration processes, insufficient maternity protection, and workplace violence against women.¹⁷

2.6 Institutional Structure: Department of Labour, BGMEA, BKMEA

- **Department of Labour (DoL):** Operating under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the DoL is tasked with enforcement, inspections, and dispute resolution. However, it faces critical challenges: a severe shortage of female inspectors, inadequate funding, absence of real-time factory data, and susceptibility to political and corporate influence. Consequently, inspections are infrequent and ineffective, especially in remote or informal areas.
- **BGMEA and BKMEA:** These associations represent garment and knitwear factory owners and export interests. While professing commitment to worker welfare, their actions are often reactive and driven by external pressures. Post-Rana Plaza initiatives like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, led by Western buyers, temporarily improved safety but neglected systemic issues like gender discrimination and unpaid overtime.¹⁸

¹⁷ ILO Committee of Experts. "Observations on Bangladesh." ILOLEX Database, 2022.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch. *Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most: Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories*, 2015.

Chapter 3

Women's Participation in the Readymade Garment Industry

3.1 Historical Context and Growth of the RMG Sector

The Readymade Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has transformed into the cornerstone of the national economy. Emerging modestly in the late 1970s, it grew into a multi-billion-dollar export leader by 2024. This expansion was propelled by global economic changes, notably trade liberalization and Bangladesh's advantageous access under the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), facilitating quota-free exports to Western markets.¹⁹ Spurred by international buyers and multinational corporations, numerous joint ventures and private enterprises arose, capitalizing on inexpensive labour and supportive government incentives like tax breaks, duty-free equipment imports, and bonded warehouse facilities.²⁰

Exponential growth characterized the RMG sector during the 1980s and 1990s. Government emphasis on export-led industrialization, coupled with backing from international financial institutions for structural adjustment programmes, fostered an environment conducive to labour-intensive industries.²¹ A pivotal outcome of this shift was the unprecedented mass entry of women into formal industrial employment, altering Bangladesh's socio-economic fabric.

As of 2024, the RMG sector represents roughly 84% of Bangladesh's total export income and employs more than four million individuals. Women make up an estimated 60–65% of this workforce. Their extensive participation signifies not merely an economic change but a fundamental restructuring of gender roles in public life, particularly within an economy previously reliant on agriculture and informal work. However, this transformation has not been matched by corresponding advancements in social protection or gender justice for female workers. While the industry has substantially boosted GDP and foreign exchange, it has simultaneously become a locus of systemic inequity and exploitation.

¹⁹ Ahmed, F. (2004). *The Rise of the Bangladesh Garment Industry: Globalization, Women Workers, and Voice*.

²⁰ Siddiqi D. M. (2009). "Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era", *Feminist Review*, 91(1), 154–174.

²¹ World Bank. (2007). *Bangladesh Strategy for Sustained Growth*.

3.2 Role of Women in the RMG Sector

The incorporation of women into the readymade garment (RMG) labour force has simultaneously driven industrial achievement and mirrored gendered employment patterns. Employers frequently depict female workers as “cost-effective,” citing assumptions about their compliance, dexterity, and willingness to endure long hours without dissent. These perceptions have fostered the deliberate feminization of the workforce, less as an acknowledgment of women’s abilities and more as a strategy to minimize labour expenses and weaken collective bargaining power.²²

Women in RMG factories perform various roles such as sewing, cutting, button attachment, ironing, folding, tagging, quality inspection, and packing. Despite being central to the production process, they are significantly underrepresented in leadership or technical roles.²³ Supervisory positions are overwhelmingly held by men, establishing a gender hierarchy reflective of broader patriarchal norms. This exclusion from career advancement is frequently justified by stereotypes deeming women unsuitable for technical or managerial duties.

The commodification of women's labour is exacerbated by international buyers demanding fast fashion, pressuring factories to slash production costs. Consequently, female workers endure the harshest aspects of exploitative conditions.²⁴ Their daily reality involves stringent deadlines, verbal harassment, and unattainable production quotas, often without guaranteed fundamental rights like paid maternity leave or safe workplaces.

²² Elson, D. and Pearson, R. (1981). "Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers", *Feminist Review*, 7(1).

²³ ILO (2019). *Skills for Employment Policy Brief: Gender Analysis of the RMG Sector*.

²⁴ Clean Clothes Campaign (2021). *Breaking the Chains: Labour Exploitation in Garment Supply Chains*.

3.3 Nature of Employment: Contractual, Informal, and Precarious

Employment structures within the RMG sector are marked by informality and precarity, especially for women. Although Bangladeshi labour laws, including the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and its amendments, require written contracts, paid leave, and social security benefits, many factories disregard these regulations. Hiring is often based on verbal agreements facilitated by contractors or intermediaries, circumventing formal recruitment processes.

Key features of women's RMG employment include:

- **Daily wage or piece-rate payment:** Wages calculated per piece or per day incentivize extended working hours and disadvantage slower workers.
- **Lack of appointment letters or ID cards:** This hinders proof of employment status in legal or administrative conflicts.
- **No access to provident funds or gratuity:** Many women retire without savings or retirement benefits despite years of service.
- **Inadequate maternity protection:** Pregnant women often face dismissal or pressure to resign to avoid legal responsibilities.
- **Absence of formal grievance channels:** Complaining workers risk termination or blacklisting.

Furthermore, employment stability is heavily dependent on export orders from global brands. During demand fluctuations, women are typically the first laid off, often with minimal or no compensation. This insecurity compels many to tolerate poor conditions, fearing unemployment and social stigma if they return to their villages without earnings.

3.4 Gender-based Division of Labour

The RMG sector exemplifies a rigid gender-based division of labour that institutionalizes inequality. Factory layouts and task assignments reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Men typically fill roles involving machine operation, cutting, maintenance, and quality control tasks classified as “skilled.” Conversely, women are predominantly assigned repetitive, lower-paid tasks such as sewing, thread trimming, and button attaching jobs labelled “unskilled” despite demanding considerable manual precision and endurance.

This segregation results in pronounced wage gaps. Even when performing identical tasks to men, women often receive lower pay due to discriminatory practices and opaque wage systems. Additionally, women are frequently bypassed for promotions or training that could lead to supervisory positions. Management often justifies this exclusion with stereotypes portraying women as emotionally volatile, physically weak, or incapable of handling pressure.

The persistence of this gendered division is also evident symbolically women are seldom seen negotiating with management at factory gates or leading trade unions. Despite notable exceptions, such as women-led protests following the Tazreen and Rana Plaza disasters, deep-rooted patriarchal barriers remain embedded in the industry's organizational culture.

3.5 Socio-economic Background of Female Workers

Understanding women's involvement in the RMG sector necessitates examining their socio-economic origins. Most female workers migrate from rural districts like Kurigram, Rangpur, Jamalpur, and Mymensingh, driven by poverty, landlessness, and scarce job opportunities, to urban industrial hubs such as Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Chattogram.²⁵

Common socio-demographic traits of female RMG workers include:

- **Age:** Primarily 18–35 years old, though underage girls are occasionally found despite child labour bans.²⁶
- **Education:** Most have incomplete primary education; a minority possess secondary schooling.
- **Marital Status:** Many are separated, widowed, divorced, or single mothers.²⁷
- **Housing:** Reside in densely populated slums, frequently sharing small rooms.²⁸
- **Financial Responsibility:** Often the primary household earners, supporting parents, children, or siblings.²⁹

This socio-economic vulnerability fosters conditions ripe for exploitation. Limited education restricts awareness of legal rights, while social stigma attached to women working outside the home discourages them from reporting abuse. Moreover, pervasive fear of job loss deters participation in trade unions or collective bargaining.³⁰

Furthermore, long working hours (often 10–12 hours daily) leave scant time for family care or personal growth. Many women report chronic health problems, including malnutrition, reproductive health issues, and psychological stress.³¹ The dual burden of factory labour and unpaid domestic duties further entrenches their marginalization.

²⁵ Centre for Policy Dialogue (2015). *Socioeconomic Conditions of RMG Workers in Bangladesh*.

²⁶ UNICEF Bangladesh (2022). *Child Labour in the Informal Economy*.

²⁷ Naripokkho (2021). *Changing Demographics of Female Garment Workers*.

²⁸ BRAC Urban Development Programme (2019). *Slum Living Conditions of Garment Workers*.

²⁹ Save the Children (2021). *The Hidden Burden: Female RMG Workers and Family Responsibilities*.

³⁰ War on Want (2016). *Stitched Up: Women Workers and the Bangladeshi Garment Industry*.

³¹ Médecins Sans Frontières (2021). *Health Crisis in Bangladesh's Garment Factories*.

Chapter 4

Challenges Faced by Female Garment Workers

4.1 Structural and Systemic Discrimination: An Overview

Bangladesh's Readymade Garment (RMG) sector, though lauded for driving economic growth, conceals a harsh reality: the systemic exploitation of its predominantly female workforce. Despite forming the industry's backbone, women endure discrimination, perilous working environments, wage disparities, and institutional marginalization. These issues are not incidental but structurally ingrained in the sector's socio-economic and legal framework. This chapter analyzes the multifaceted vulnerabilities of female RMG workers through empirical research, government/NGO reports, legal texts, and feminist labor theory, offering a nuanced examination of socio-legal barriers undermining their rights and dignity.

4.2 Wage Discrimination and Irregular Payments

4.2.1 Gender-Based Wage Gap

Women receive lower wages than men for equally or more strenuous work, violating Section 345 of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, which mandates equal pay for equal work. Employers rationalize this gap by falsely labeling women as "secondary earners" or "less efficient," despite 70% being primary household providers.³² Piece-rate workers suffer acutely, as women are assigned lower-yield tasks, reducing earnings despite longer hours.

4.2.2 Irregular or Delayed Payments

Delayed wages often by weeks or months are pervasive. During economic downturns, such as COVID-19, women face disproportionate dismissal or unpaid labor.³³ The absence of formal contracts and grievance mechanisms prevents recourse for withheld wages, while fear of job loss enforces silence.

³² Fair Wear Foundation (2021), *Gender-Based Wage Discrimination in RMG*.

³³ ActionAid Bangladesh (2020), *COVID-19 Impact on Female Garment Workers*.

4.3 Harassment and Violence at Workplace

4.3.1 Sexual Harassment

Male supervisors routinely subject women to verbal abuse, sexual comments, and physical advances.³⁴ Factories largely ignore Supreme Court directives in *BNWLA v. Bangladesh* (2009), which mandated Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs).³⁵ Workers often lack legal awareness or fear retaliation, and compliance officers frequently suppress complaints to protect factory reputations.

4.3.2 Physical and Verbal Abuse

Managers enforce production quotas through shouting, slapping, and threats. Abuse intensifies during menstruation or pregnancy, often dismissed as necessary "discipline". Weak labor inspections and local authority collusion perpetuate this impunity.³⁶

4.4 Unsafe Working Conditions

4.4.1 Factory Safety

Despite reforms following Rana Plaza (2013) and Tazreen Fashions (2012), many subcontracting units still operate without fire exits, ventilation, or emergency protocols. Women frequently assigned to crowded upper floors face heightened risk due to locked exits and inadequate safety drills.

4.4.2 Occupational Hazards

Poorly lit, noisy, and unventilated factories lead to:

- Repetitive strain injuries from sewing
- Respiratory ailments due to fabric dust
- Headaches and vision problems
- Urinary infections from restricted toilet access
- Reproductive health complications from prolonged standing and lifting³⁷

On-site healthcare is rare, and private treatment is often unaffordable.

³⁴ Naripokkho and BLAST (2020), *Harassment in Garment Factories: A Field Report*.

³⁵ Supreme Court of Bangladesh, *BNWLA v. Bangladesh*, 2009.

³⁶ Transparency International Bangladesh (2022), *Corruption in Labour Oversight*.

³⁷ WHO (2017), *Occupational Hazards in Textile Industry*.

4.5 Health Issues and Maternity Rights

4.5.1 Lack of Health Facilities

Few factories provide even basic first aid. Pregnant workers are forced to perform physically demanding tasks to avoid termination. The absence of nursing rooms or menstrual hygiene provisions leads to infections, absenteeism, and humiliation.

4.5.2 Denial of Maternity Leave

Although Section 45 of the Labour Act guarantees paid maternity leave, 78% of women remain unaware of this right, according to a BRAC report (2023). Over half of those who request leave are either denied or terminated, in violation of national law and ILO Convention 183.

4.6 Lack of Union Representation

4.6.1 Union Suppression

Although legal, union formation is routinely obstructed. Women leaders face harassment, forced transfers, or dismissal. Male-dominated unions often neglect gender-specific issues like sexual harassment and childcare.³⁸

4.6.2 Fear of Retaliation

As primary breadwinners, many women avoid voicing complaints due to fear of job loss. With few urban employment alternatives, this economic dependency deepens their vulnerability.³⁹

4.7 Exploitation in the Informal Sector

Female workers in subcontracted or home-based roles who constitute a large portion of the labor force suffer from:

- Wages below legal minimums
- Lack of employment contracts or worker recognition
- No access to maternity, health, or leave benefits
- Exclusion from national statistics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs
- Dependence on exploitative middlemen⁴⁰

³⁸ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2018), *Gender and Trade Union Rights in RMG*.

³⁹ UN Women (2022), *Economic Vulnerabilities of Women Workers*.

⁴⁰ International Labour Organization (2020), *Informal Labour in Bangladesh's RMG Supply Chain*.

4.8 Intersectional Challenges: Gender, Class, and Migration

The vulnerabilities of women workers are amplified by multiple intersecting factors:

- **Gender:** Patriarchal control over mobility and decision-making
- **Class:** Chronic poverty and lack of assets
- **Migration:** Exclusion from urban services and stable housing
- **Education:** Low literacy rates hinder rights advocacy and collective action⁴¹

These intersections trap women in a cycle of systemic exploitation and dependency.

4.9 Legal Gaps and Institutional Weakness

Despite the presence of progressive legislation, implementation is grossly inadequate:

- **Labour Courts:** Overburdened, slow, and expensive
- **Labour Inspectors:** Severely understaffed and sometimes corrupt
- **BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association):** Prioritizes profits over worker welfare
- **International Obligations:** Ratified standards like ILO conventions and CEDAW remain largely unimplemented due to political inertia and global supply chain pressure⁴²

These institutional failures entrench the marginalization of female garment workers.

⁴¹ Naripokkho (2021), *Intersecting Disadvantages of Garment Workers*.

⁴² UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), *Concluding Observations on Bangladesh* (2017).

Chapter 5

Case Studies and Comparative Analysis

5.1 Contextual Overview

A comprehensive analysis of labour rights necessitates examining both legal frameworks and the lived experiences of workers. In Bangladesh's RMG sector where women constitute over 80% of the workforce systemic failures in safety protocols, accountability mechanisms, and gender equity persist.⁴³ The catastrophic events at Rana Plaza (2013) and Tazreen Fashions (2012) epitomize these institutional gaps. This chapter employs empirical case studies alongside a comparative examination of garment-producing nations (Vietnam, India, Sri Lanka) to critically assess legal architectures, enforcement efficacy, and gender-responsive reforms. Through this dual approach, we identify scalable solutions and persistent obstacles in safeguarding female workers' rights.

5.2 The Rana Plaza Collapse (2013): A Landmark Failure

5.2.1 Anatomy of the Tragedy

The collapse of Rana Plaza on April 24, 2013, stands as one of the deadliest industrial disasters in history.⁴⁴ Over 1,134 workers predominantly young women aged 18–35 perished, while more than 2,500 sustained life-altering injuries.⁴⁵ Critical evidence revealed that factory managers, aware of visible structural cracks reported the previous day, coerced workers into re-entering the compromised building under threat of wage forfeiture. This gross negligence laid bare the lethal intersection of profit-driven production and regulatory apathy within global fashion supply chains.

⁴³ Clean Clothes Campaign, *Facts on the Garment Industry in Bangladesh*, 2023.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most*, 2015.

⁴⁵ ILO, *Rana Plaza Victims and the Compensation Fund Report*, 2019.

5.2.2 Legal Reckoning and Institutional Response

The international outcry catalyzed two primary initiatives:

- The Accord on Fire and Building Safety: A legally binding agreement signed by over 200 global brands, mandating factory inspections and safety upgrades.
- The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety: A U.S.-brand coalition focused on infrastructure remediation.

Domestically, murder and corruption charges were filed against building owner Sohel Rana and factory management.⁴⁶ Yet, by 2025, judicial delays and procedural inefficiencies have stalled convictions, denying closure to victims.⁴⁷ Compensation disbursed through the ILO Trust Fund proved inconsistent, failing to address long-term medical care, psychological trauma, or livelihood rehabilitation for survivors.

5.2.3 Intersectional Gendered Consequences

- Economic Collapse: Most deceased/injured women were primary breadwinners, triggering intergenerational poverty in their rural households.
- Social Stigmatization: Disabled survivors faced marital abandonment and community exclusion, exacerbating psychological distress.
- Systemic Erasure: Relief programs ignored gendered needs (e.g., childcare, reproductive health), perpetuating institutional marginalization.

5.3 Tazreen Fashions Fire (2012): Echoes of Impunity

5.3.1 Crisis Chronology

On November 24, 2012, a fire ignited by electrical faults engulfed Tazreen Fashions in Ashulia.⁴⁸ Locked emergency exits, absent fire alarms, and managerial orders forbidding evacuation trapped workers resulting in 117 deaths (92% women) and over 200 injuries.⁴⁹ This preventable tragedy underscored the normalization of hazardous working conditions in subcontracting factories supplying global retailers.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ The Daily Star, "Rana Plaza Trial Delays", 2024.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Delayed Justice: Rana Plaza Ten Years On*, 2023.

⁴⁸ New Age, "Tazreen Fire Report", 2013.

⁴⁹ Clean Clothes Campaign, *Tazreen Fashions Fire Chronology*, 2013.

⁵⁰ Siddiqi, D.M., "Do We Really Care About Our Workers?", *Dhaka Tribune*, 2015.

5.3.2 Accountability Vacuum

While factory owners faced charges of manslaughter and criminal negligence, substantive justice remains unrealized:

- Trials have languished in courts for over a decade.
- The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) lacks technical capacity and political autonomy to enforce reforms.⁵¹
- Compensation for victims' families was fragmented and insufficient, highlighting the state's failure to protect worker welfare.

5.3.3 Enduring Lessons

- Expendability of Female Labour: Women were deemed replaceable commodities, not rights-bearing workers.⁵²
- Coercion vs. Consent: Poverty compels women to accept perilous working environments.
- Reactive vs. Proactive Governance: Disasters prompted rhetoric not systemic reform exposing the need for preventative regulation.

5.4 Judicial Remedies and Structural Barriers

5.4.1 Labour Courts: Inaccessible Justice

Bangladesh's labour adjudication system is crippled by:

- Protracted case timelines (3–5 years),
 - Gender-insensitive judicial officers,
 - Financial and logistical barriers for female plaintiffs (e.g., travel costs, employer intimidation).
- Consequently, labour courts functionally exclude women from seeking redress.

5.4.2 Civil Society Interventions: Limited Gains

Organizations like Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), BLAST, and Naripokkho provide critical legal aid and policy advocacy. Their efforts have secured isolated victories in compensation claims and harassment cases. However, geographic constraints (urban-centric operations), funding shortages, and case backlogs prevent scalable impact.

⁵¹ Siddiqi, D.M., "Women Workers as Disposable Labour", *Feminist Review*, 2016.

⁵² BLAST, *Labour Law Enforcement Survey*, 2023.

5.5 Comparative Analysis with Other Countries

Country	Advancements	Persistent Challenges	Transferable Lessons for Bangladesh
Vietnam	Labour Code (2019) enshrines gender equality, 6-month paid maternity leave. Trade agreements (e.g., EU-Vietnam FTA) link market access to labour compliance.	Informal sector workers excluded from protections; wage gaps persist. ⁵³	Leverage trade incentives: Tie GSP+ status to concrete labour reforms.
India	Sexual Harassment Act (2013) mandates Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs). Maternity Benefits Act guarantees 26 weeks' paid leave. ⁵⁴	Weak enforcement in Export Processing Zones (EPZs); union busting rampant. ⁵⁵	Decentralize unionization: Empower grassroots women's collectives in factories.
Sri Lanka	Board of Investment (BOI) enforces strict compliance for export factories. ⁵⁶ Skills training (e.g., leadership, ESL) elevates female workers' agency.	Gender-based violence underreported; unions lack autonomy.	Invest in capability building: Integrate vocational + legal literacy training.

5.6 Synthesis: Shared Regional Deficiencies

- Cross-Cutting Failures: Inadequate inspectorates, suppression of collective bargaining, and exploitation of informal labour pervade all four countries.
- Bangladesh's Unique Paradox: Despite the highest concentration of female workers (4.2 million), it exhibits the weakest legal redress mechanisms and lowest gender-inclusive union participation.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, *Vietnam Labour Rights Gaps*, 2022.

⁵⁴ ILO, *India Maternity Benefits and Gaps*, 2021.

⁵⁵ ITUC, *Global Rights Index: India*, 2023.

⁵⁶ BOI Sri Lanka, *Export Factory Compliance Data*, 2022.

5.7 Strategic Recommendations

Core Findings

1. Cultures of Impunity: Corporate and state actors evade accountability through judicial delays and institutional corruption.
2. Gendered Precarity: RMG profitability hinges on the systematic suppression of women's rights and safety.
3. Reform Levers: Trade conditionalities + worker solidarity exert stronger pressure than domestic legislation alone.⁵⁷

Actionable Recommendations

a. Judicial Overhaul:

- Establish fast-track labour tribunals with a 12-month case resolution mandate.
- Train judges on gender-sensitive adjudication and ILO Convention applications.

b. Union Transformation:

- Mandate 50% female leadership in registered unions.
- Legally protect union organizers from retaliation.

c. Grassroots Empowerment:

- Scale mobile legal clinics in industrial zones to boost legal literacy.
- Integrate workers' rights modules into factory onboarding programs.

d. Transparency Mechanisms:

- Digitize and publicize factory compliance records via a government portal.
- Install anonymous grievance hotlines audited by third parties.

e. Conditional Trade Access:

- Revoke export licenses for factories violating gender equality/safety standards.
- Prioritize EU/US market access for firms with verified worker well-being metrics.

⁵⁷ NYU Stern, op. cit.

Chapter 6

Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Core Insights

This study reveals a complex interplay between legal frameworks, economic imperatives, and sociocultural dynamics in Bangladesh's RMG sector. While the industry has enabled formal economic participation for millions of women (constituting 60–70% of the workforce), systemic inequities persist:

- **Implementation Gap:** Protections under the Labour Act (2006, amended 2013/2018) covering maternity benefits, equal pay, and safety remain inconsistently enforced, particularly in subcontracting units and gender-specific cases.
- **Wage Discrimination:** Female workers earn less than male counterparts despite legal guarantees, exacerbated by opaque piece-rate systems.⁵⁸
- **Safety Deficiencies:** Post-Rana Plaza/Tazreen reforms improved structural safety but failed to address overcrowding, excessive hours, and emergency preparedness.
- **Institutionalized Harassment:** Section 332 (harassment provisions) and High Court guidelines are functionally inaccessible due to fear of retaliation and absent confidential reporting.⁵⁹
- **Union Marginalization:** Male-dominated unions neglect gender-specific issues like discrimination and reproductive health.
- **Informal Worker Exclusion:** Subcontracted/home-based workers operate outside legal protections.⁶⁰
- **Data Vacuum:** Lack of gender-disaggregated statistics impedes evidence-based policymaking.⁶¹

6.2 Identified Legal-Policy Deficiencies

- **Gender-Blind Legislation:** No provisions for menstrual leave, lactation breaks, or childcare.
- **Institutional Weakness:** Under-resourced labour inspections ignore gender violations.
- **Ineffective Redress:** Grievance mechanisms lack confidentiality and accessibility.
- **Informal Sector Exclusion:** Subcontracted workers denied legal recognition.
- **Unenforced International Commitments:** ILO Conventions 100/111 and CEDAW lack domestic operationalization.
- **Research Neglect:** Absence of centralized data on women's health, wages, and harassment.

⁵⁸ Fair Wear Foundation, *Wage Ladder Reports in Bangladesh*, 2022.

⁵⁹ High Court Division of Bangladesh, *Guidelines on Sexual Harassment*, Writ Petition No. 5916 of 2008.

⁶⁰ ILO, *Decent Work for Home-Based Workers in Asia*, 2019.

⁶¹ UN Women Bangladesh, *Data Gaps in Gender and Labour*, 2021.

6.3 Strategic Recommendations

Legal & Structural Reform

a. **Amend Labour Act:**

- Mandate menstrual/reproductive health leave
- Require paid lactation breaks and crèche facilities
- Strengthen anti-harassment enforcement
- Extend maternity coverage to informal workers

b. **Reinforce Monitoring:**

- Hire/train female labour inspectors
- Conduct unannounced gender-focused inspections

c. **Inclusive Recognition:**

- Formalize legal status for subcontracted/home-based workers

Operational Mechanisms

d. **Grievance Systems:**

- Establish anonymous factory-level reporting with NGO oversight
- Create independent labour ombudsman offices

e. **Union Transformation:**

- Implement 50% female leadership quotas
- Provide legal protection for union organizers

Capacity Building

f. Worker Education:

- Factory-based training on rights, safety, and harassment reporting
- Mass media campaigns for societal awareness

g. Data Infrastructure:

- Develop national gender-disaggregated labour database

Multi-Stakeholder Governance

h. Enforce Global Standards:

- Domesticating ILO/CEDAW provisions into binding law
- Link export licenses to compliance verification

i. Collaborative Framework:

- Government-NGO-buyer-union task force for compliance monitoring
- Public digital platform for factory audit transparency

6.4 Institutional Responsibilities

Stakeholder	Critical Actions
Government	Fund inspectorate expansion; mandate gender audits; fast-track labour courts
NGOs	Provide legal aid/health services; conduct rights awareness programs
International Buyers	Enforce ethical sourcing via binding contracts; finance worker welfare initiatives
BGMEA/BKMEA	Establish gender desks; train members on labour standards
ILO/UN Women	Technical assistance for legal harmonization; independent compliance monitoring

6.5 Concluding Analysis

Bangladesh's RMG sector embodies a paradox: it empowers women economically while perpetuating structural violence against them. Transformative not cosmetic change requires:

- **Redistributing Power:** Embedding women in union leadership and policy design.⁶²
- **Closing Enforcement Chasms:** Aligning legal promises with institutional practice.⁶³
- **Rejecting Exploitative Models:** Prioritizing worker dignity over profit maximization.⁶⁴

The sector's future hinges on reconstructing its foundations through gender-responsive governance, where:

- Laws translate into tangible protections
- Data drives evidence-based interventions
- Transparent accountability replaces impunity

Only then can the RMG industry fulfill its potential as an engine of equitable development for Bangladesh's women.⁶⁵

⁶² Akhter, S., *Women's Leadership in Trade Unions in Bangladesh*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020.

⁶³ ILO, *Bridging the Enforcement Gap*, 2021.

⁶⁴ Anner, M., *Predatory Purchasing Practices in Global Supply Chains*, Penn State Center for Global Workers' Rights, 2020.

⁶⁵ UNDP Bangladesh, *Gender-Responsive Governance for Sustainable Development*, 2022.

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NYU Stern, *op cit*

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